

Workshop Cultures of Computation and Quantification

Abstract

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Michel, Cécile

The weight system of the Old Assyrian merchants

The private archives of the Assyrian merchants found at Kaneš, in central Anatolia, highlight the use of the weight system, well adapted to quantify the metals they traded from East to West and back. An atypical progressive metrological list of weights shows the importance of fractions in the Old Assyrian numeracy and computing practices.

Account documents reveal two different cultures for the use of weighing units according to the quantified commodities and the geography. In Upper Mesopotamia, tin and silver were measured with the use of *gu*, *mana* and *gin*, while in Anatolia, locally traded copper could be counted only with the *mana* unit.

Also, merchants had to deal with different standards: the Anatolian *mana* weighted ten per cent less than the Assyrian one. Texts mention controls of weights and reveal methods to correct weight deviations. A hundred and fifty stone weights found at Kaneš may be compared with the data provided by the metrological list. These weights, which show significant discrepancies, witness the existence of many individual weight standards, and confirm the recurrent necessity to correct weight deviations.